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# Temporal Belongings



*Interview Series Number One*

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Encounters Arts

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Arts & Humanities  
Research Council



*Ruth Ben-Tovim* has worked as a professional artist and consultant for 20 years using the arts to work creatively with people in the public, private, education and voluntary sectors. She specialises in devising, delivering and managing site specific participatory arts projects and programmes across the UK. In 2004 she co-founded *Encounters*, a participatory arts initiative based in Dartington, Devon and is the organisation's Creative Director. She also works as a freelance artist, lecturer and dramaturg and is on the Board of Trustees for the *Transition Network*.

## Communities and Time

**MB:** First, can I ask you what interests you in the relationship between time and community.

**RBT:** Yes. I suppose different aspects of it interested me. When I'm engaging with communities I often feel that there's a need to look at the past in order to look at the future, particularly when engaging with communities around change, around cohesion and around issues of difference. Quite a lot of the work that my organisation, *Encounters Arts*, has been doing over the last ten years has been around creating a process for a community to have a voice in decision-making about where they live and in being part of co-creating what the future of that place might be.

So my interest is in the whole relationship between past, present and future. I've learnt to see that relationship as something that is fluid. We can change our perception of the past by looking at the future or, if we really give ourselves a chance to take stock, to understand what we might be thinking or feeling in this present moment, then we can have a different perception of the future. So recognising that inter-relationship between the past and future really interests me. And because I'm also interested in how we create an inter-connected and sustainable future then it becomes imperative that the future is seen as something we are connected to, so we are not existing just in the present moment. So I suppose these kinds of conceptual aspects of time have been a real interest for me.

**MB:** And so what kind of communities have you been working with in particular? I know you've been involved in creative consultation projects, for example, but I was wondering how you would characterise your work?

**RBT:** I've been doing community engagement and co-creation work for the last ten years as part of the work of *Encounters*. We are a participatory arts organisation, and for the first five years of that work we were very neighbourhood based, working with culturally

diverse communities in cities. So we did a lot of work in Sheffield, for example, in probably the most multi-cultural part of the city. It's a place that's had a lot of change. There's a large, diverse housing estate, a large South Asian community, there's a student population, there's a longstanding white working class community. It's the sort of area that's become a little bit bohemian as well. So there's actually quite an influx of people who've got no history of having lived in that area in the past. It's also a neighbourhood that is deprived and that is undergoing regeneration. So we worked there, and in other areas in Sheffield for about three years.

Another city we worked in was Liverpool, particularly in South Liverpool. Again that's an area undergoing a huge amount of change and which has experienced a large amount of deprivation as it moved away from the kinds of industries that used to be based there. So that community was quite different from the Sheffield community but were also a community facing change. Later we also worked in a town in Yorkshire, again undergoing a lot of regeneration, but with a very longstanding white community and a longstanding South Asian community, which operated along quite parallel tracks that didn't connect.

## Are communities static?

**MB:** That's really interesting, because there can be a tendency in academia, but also in policy or politics more widely, to treat communities as if they're static, or stuck. This can lead to the assumption that communities don't change and that they need outside interventions (from governments, academics or artists for example) to shake things up. On the other hand too much change is equated with the loss of community, but it sounds like from your experience that communities have to be understood as dynamic.

**RBT:** Well I think that's really interesting, this whole issue of change. Sometimes our work is in an area where the change is being imposed upon the community, for example through demographic change, which is happening in the Sheffield neighbourhood. It is a place where there are quite a lot of asylum seekers, refugees and new arrivals coming into the area, as well as a student population who are continuously moving in and out. So the range of people moving into the area is constantly changing. These demographic changes forced the community to change and within this process there was actually quite a lot of 'staticness' and feelings of being 'stuck' or disempowered. And because it was also an area that was deemed in need of regeneration, then there were further changes imposed at a policy level.

Particularly in Sheffield, it felt that the community was changing all the time, but definitely that pockets of the community were quite static and quite "stuck".

There was a kind of micro-connection happening, but not on a neighbourhood level. So I guess that question of whether communities need intervention or not is quite important. I think that for me it's more of a question of understanding how communities adapt and looking at what external support is needed versus what might come from within the community.

## Multiple times of community

**MB:** Yes, actually one of the other issues I wanted to ask you about is the idea that social life is characterised by multiple times, rather than just one shared time. So even if there might be aspects of a community that seem static, one of the problems is that governments or policy makers have assumed that the whole community is static. But you have suggested a really nice picture of a community being made up of lots of different vectors and of different participants bringing with them different senses of pasts and futures, as well as different senses of movement and speed.

Can you remember any instances where institutions have treated groups as if they're static and not noticed that there are all these different 'times' going on. I was particularly interested in whether that kind of approach has caused any problems? I also wondered whether, in acknowledging the multiple times of community, you had any examples of instances where conflicts between different speeds or tempos could actually be quite creative or helpful?

**RBT:** Yes, that's really interesting. I did quite a long piece of work in Huddersfield where we were creating area plans for around 10,000 people. They were supposed to work together to come up with a neighbourhood plan for their area, which is a massive amount of people to come together to come up with a plan. There was definitely the sense from the Council that it would be possible to consult in a meaningful way with that many people and for that many people to come up with a plan. What I observed in that situation was that there was a whole raft of activities, groups and movements who were under the Council's radar. They were only prepared to see the official groups who worked to the official timeframe of what we needed every month. That is, the kinds of groups that have a clear system, that elect their members, and have been on the neighbourhood committee for 25 years. In a way, it was almost like the 'static' groups within a community were somehow easier to engage with from the Council's point of view. They were the groups who could be seen as 'the community'.

Yet there was all the other energy that was happening in a lot of the wards of Huddersfield where we were working. It was like there were two different realities going on. Our intervention was to try to

bring that to the surface and to try to find a way for there to be a dialogue between those groups.

I think what's really interesting is that a lot of institutions and organisations have a rigidity in their own structure that mirrors the 'staticness' of, let's call them, 'the usual suspects'. This could be because these kinds of governing institutions have particular timeframes to work with, for example, a year to get a plan together, or that the neighbourhood plan itself needs to cover the next ten years so that highways or other large projects can be planned and implemented. So there's a mirroring going on between the rigid, static approach to planning, consultation and engagement and the static nature of preferred community groups. Then around it there is this whole other energy where there are other groups and other processes that are getting on with themselves and are more emergent, but who aren't actually given much status or power, and that's where some of the difficulty lies I think. I've observed a lot of that happening.

## Planning time

**MB:** That's fascinating. It was interesting too what you were saying about having to create a plan. So there'd only be one plan presumably? It's as if there's also an assumption that everyone can converge on this one shared future. But would you have any ideas of how you would do that differently? Could there be multiple future plans for example?

**RBT:** I guess that what I learnt was that there's a fixation on "the plan" and that actually that could be toned down to become a minor focus. At the moment, the plan that has been written down is the major focus. This means that the process of dialogue, the processes of deepening and understanding, of meeting, of just getting to know each other – of community building let's say – are almost totally ignored. So the work of community building, which is actually a key process for planning, often only gets brought in to facilitate making the plan, rather than being seen as important in its own right.

As artists we found that it was quite an innovation to bring in processes of creative consultation in order to involve more people in the plan. For example, we designed a range of different activities to reach the Asian women's group and instead of asking them to come to meetings we designed something that they could pass around their houses. We also used forum theatre to bring people together, or used food, or went out on the street. We developed lots of different ways of reaching people, so you had a myriad of different voices expressing what people wanted.

But the problem was that, in the end, all of that energy and engagement (which was a process as

much as a product) was being funnelled into a static plan. Actually quite a lot of the processes that we had been using and experimenting with weren't in the plan. And I suppose I stopped doing that kind of work because there was a sense that another way of doing consultation would be to actually focus on the process, which can be an emergent process for community dialogue and exchange. It's actually not all about the plan. Sometimes it's about getting people together, saying, "Hello, who are you, how are you feeling in this moment?" and from that a huge amount can happen.

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Whereas it tends to be that bodies, governments and local authorities are more obsessed with getting people together and having them plan what playground they

want, as opposed to getting people together so that they can connect and get to know each other better. So those were some of the debates I've often had within a Council setting. I've found that valuing the present moment is actually part of the process of unlocking the future, rather than ignoring the present and just thinking about what we want in the future. So in answer to your question, how I would respond to the multiple times of community would be to minimise 'the plan' and emphasise 'the process' instead.

## Project time

**MB:** That's really lovely. It's flowing in really nicely with what I wanted to ask you next actually, which is about how to keep projects flexible and adaptable? In some of our *Temporal Belongings* events we have been exploring 'the time of the project' and the linear timeline of project initiation, delivery and evaluation. We've been questioning this idea of neat beginnings and ends. Is there something, do you think, about 'the project', and its linear model, that makes it difficult to work with communities in a flexible way?

**RBT:** Yeah, I think it's a real problem. In a way it reminds me of issues that came up in some of the work I was doing before I got involved in this more participatory, creative work within communities. I was a theatre maker and there was a lot of discussion in theatre about narrative and those kinds of linear narratives of cause and effect, or beginning, middle, end, or a sort of A, B, C structure that is very neat and can be found in so much of the theory that has dominated us. And then I discovered chaos theory and non-linearity and complexity and I thought that that

is actually a much more realistic way to understand how we live. So to return to your question about 'the project', I think it's important that we ask, How do you design a non-linear project? How do you design a project that's looking at complexity? How do you design a project that isn't about the beginning, middle and end but still allow a project to be a journey?

A good example of the non-linearity of the project might be our *Encounters Shop* projects.<sup>1</sup> We found in Sheffield, for example, that every day we were responding to what was emerging rather than saying, "Well on the third day we're going to do this and on the fifth day we'll do that." New ideas would be brought in every day. So our role as project designers became much more about designing a frame, or designing an enquiry question, or designing a set of invitations to join in, rather than having a pre-emptive sense of what outcomes we wanted and what we were heading for, like in a play where I know what I'm aiming for and we've got to rehearse towards that.

In Sheffield, because we were there for quite a long time, we were able to be quite emergent. So we had one shop and then we had another shop, and then from that there was an idea of creating a book with people. Then we got the idea of a performance and somebody who'd been in the first year of the project ended up in the third year as well. Then we went back to the shop four years later, but it was with another idea. And I suppose in the *Encounters Shop* projects some of my difficulties would be that, unlike the ideal 'project' because of the natural energy of them, they wouldn't necessarily 'end'. Instead, part of why that particular project stopped was because of a funding issue, which in itself is problematic.

## Funding time

**MB:** Yes, how have you responded to that need to negotiate between funding timescales and the kinds of things you want to do?

**RBT:** It's tricky. Funding is very much about outcomes and is time focused. I've become so used to it that it's hard to imagine what else it would be. I suppose in some of the projects I start to look at how the participants, who we're creating a frame for, can become part of holding that frame, that part of the legacy. We aren't expected that they necessarily carry on the project exactly, but it is about empowering smaller emergent groups to be able to carry on their own activity. That's one level, because in some of the projects we've

<sup>1</sup> Since 2003 *Encounters* have been taking up residence in disused shops across the UK, working with local people and organisations to create evolving, co-authored artworks about the joys and challenges of everyday life. You can find out more here: <http://www.encounters-arts.org.uk/index.php/shop/>



done I did feel if we'd had more funding that there was a whole layer of other development that could have happened but didn't. So I think then you get into questions about volunteering, who you're doing the project for, what's your role as a project facilitator, should you always design a project with your not being there in mind, or what's the role of the specialist? I think that raises a lot of issues, such as, do we always want to do projects that never end? It's an interesting question.

## Project, form and time

**MB:** Well yes because there are a lot of arguments in art practice and music that boundaries are actually very productive. So maybe only having a short timescale could be beneficial. If it's too short there are, of course, problems with not having enough time to build up relationships properly and things like that, but on the other hand, maybe having time-limited funding can create a boundary within which you can get some interesting things done?

**RBT:** From my experience of the *Encounters Shop* projects, having time-limited funding to create a participatory performance, for example, is really helpful, because the structure of a performance in itself is about a process with a beginning, middle and end, where the end means us doing the performance. It's almost like the form and content match each other in that sense. So you could get funding to create a performance and then you do the performance. In that way it feels like there's a fit between something.

But something where you're trying to change or build or create a resource or bring communities together, it feels like the form of a project that's six months or a year doesn't quite fit the intention of what that kind of project is trying to do. That's when I feel that the standard project framework is not so productive. Sometimes the length of time that you're requesting on a grant application is relatively arbitrary and is based on what you think the funder will agree to. Whereas other times it's within a constraint they've already set.

I guess as a practitioner I've always been interested in that relationship between form and content. So if I'm going to make a piece of work about time, which I have done in the past – I made a piece called *The Counting of Years*, and another piece called *Time* that was looking at Einstein's theory of relativity – for me there was no point in making a piece in which all the audience could see everything at the same time, because we don't experience time like that. Instead I made an experiential piece in which there were lots of things going on and the audience had to create their own time journey through this piece, because I was interested in a piece of work where its form represented the content that we were exploring. So I suppose there's

a kind of an echo with this in that funding should suit the project. There should be a fit between them.

## Time and power

**MB:** Thanks for that. Next, I wanted to ask you about the relationship between time and power. Often time seems like it's objective and apolitical, like it's just numbers on a clock. Because of this the politics of time gets hidden and it's harder to see the processes involved in shaping what kind of time we follow, who gets to set the pace, who is thought of being 'timely', and who's left lagging behind. I think you've already addressed this issue really – things like scheduling, who has to accommodate who in meetings, so there are some very practical things like that. But I was interested in focusing more directly on how that idea of time, as something that can be used to support the power of some people and not of others, might come into your work.

**RBT:** I think that's really, really interesting. I mean I think that it's true and you can really see it in the contrast between community and political time. A good example is our *A Little Patch of Ground* project,<sup>2</sup> which we decided to link to the growing cycle. This meant that there was really no debate about how long the project needed to be, or when we needed to start it. This is unusual.

In my experience, often when you are working with local governments or local authorities there can be, on the one hand, a community that's ready to focus on an emerging issue, and there's a desire to start or respond. Then on the other hand, there's a whole other time going on which is the more political, bureaucratic time that sometimes requires people to wait for say six months because a funding application has to go through different departments and approval processes, and as a result there's a "need-time" that can't be met. Or it's the other way round – there's an end of year spend, which happens a lot and can be deeply frustrating. It's not about planning or really responding to what's going on, it's about this weird issue of underspend, where money just has to be spent before the end of the financial year. So there's millions of pounds that are being wasted because the spend isn't planned, but is in response to an external deadline or outside power. I've experienced that a lot and it's outrageous really.

But in terms of *Patch of Ground*, we've done the project for the last three years, and there's something really powerful about saying that this project has to start in the growing season or it can't happen. You know, it

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<sup>2</sup> *A Little Patch of Ground* is an inter-generational food growing and performance project that culminates in a permaculture inspired vegetable garden and a multi-media performance about relationships with the natural world. Find out more here: <http://www.encounters-arts.org.uk/?p=25>

has to be ready by April, and there's something about that. It's like planning in the world's real time, growing time, rather than working in this arbitrary time where you can start a project anywhere or simply because it's the end of a funding cycle. So I'm more and more interested in a sort of 'real time' and how we can shape, or shift, projects and responses to really start with that.

MB: So you mean that when you say to funders or organisations or councils that you're working with the growing season, then they recognise that this project is working to a different time scale?

RBT: Yes, exactly. And maybe on another level the person who is organising that funding, it's just a role they're holding. It's just a game. It's a system that we're in that says project funding has to happen in this way and in this time. I don't blame them because they are me, they are us. So I suppose what I've noticed - and it's happened more than once with this project - is that there's something about the 'needed time' of this particular project that perhaps, as a project initiator, has meant that I've driven something through rather than maybe let it drag on.

And also the partners that we've been working with have understood the importance of working to this kind of timeframe and maybe that's because underneath it all we're all connected to a deeper nature-time. Maybe there's an understanding of the need to get the seeds in the earth and that is what this project's about, so that's been quite interesting, that one.

## Pasts and futures

MB: Okay, you were saying previously that the idea of past and future was something that came up in your work and so I wanted to ask you a bit more about that. I'm particularly thinking of the possibility of there being clashes between different 'pasts', so for example between different types of memories, such as national memory versus local memories. I think you were talking about something like this in Yorkshire. But then there's also issues to do with community interventions that ignore local histories and try to step in as if those histories still don't have an effect on the present. So I was wondering how you acknowledge multiple and competing histories in your projects?

RBT: In a way I'd say that the main thrust of a lot of our work has been about memory, the past, people's experience of it. And what I get really interested in is how people's memories attach to place. How we work a lot in *Encounters* is to start from a sense that everybody's memory or history of a place is valid and needs to be heard. And so actually quite a lot of our projects are where we're inviting people to come and leave a memory or leave a story. We often say that the memory is there but it's also a kind of story. We use the term

'story' deliberately to suggest to the participant that all of our memories could be thought of as stories because they're always seen from our own perspectives. So a lot of our work for the last ten years has been about inviting people to leave a memory about their particular place.

And because there's such an issue of hierarchy, of memory and place in the communities we work with - you know, people living in a place much longer than others, or being involved in the process of building networks that others might not have been involved in - as a method that pays attention to form, we use pieces of paper for people to leave a memory or story on, but we make sure they are of the same size. So it's almost like saying this is the frame within which you can

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leave 50 words about this place, but because everyone has the same sized piece of paper we're creating a democratisation of memory.

We do this to try and allow everyone's memory of a

place to be a valid one. Whether I'm eight years old saying this is where I learnt to play football (which is one of my favourite memories that we've collected, you know, naming the street), or someone else who might say, "this is where I fell in love," or someone else leaving a more painful memory, "oh this is where my Grandma died", or someone writing "this is where I first arrived from the Congo." I can feel those memories still. And some of them are really long and people write small to fill that page. There's something about when you start to see them together. So we work a lot to produce a community's sense of co-authoring the past and of collecting their memories.

This is why in our *Encounters Shop* projects we start with an empty space that gradually fills up, making sure anybody can join in. Of course it's only a partial history of that place. If I work in a place I very rarely go and do "research" because I'm more interested in doing a lot of work to bring people in and then trusting that their partial memories in some ways represent that place and that there'll be gaps. Then what happens is that when people come in and leave a memory of a place, they start to see other people's memories attached to the same place and there's this sudden sense of expansion, of seeing their story, but also seeing that it's alongside other people's stories and memories.

I've observed from doing that activity that people's perception starts to shift in a way that

you can visibly see people gather a different set of memories or stories about somewhere and realise that they're one part of something.

So I suppose the way we've been working with this sense of difference and territory and ownership around memory is to invite all of the small memories in. In Yorkshire where there are really parallel cultural communities happening, of course they're sharing the same place so actually they start to see the similarities. But sometimes they're also actually on very different sides of the story. For example, it starts to be interesting when somebody reads a story about racial harassment in a street where other people are saying this is where they fell in love or had a great party. When people suddenly see that it starts to shift and break the silos of the past a little bit. Then I think it allows people to think, "Oh okay, so I'm part of something, I'm alongside other people, it's fluid, my version of the past isn't the only version".

**MB:** And then how would you link that idea of a multiple conflicting past to how you might want to talk about the future in your projects? Because you've said that you're very wary about focusing everything on the future or on future planning.

**RBT:** In some of the work we have done around the future, we often do a process around naming and reflecting on the present first. This allows participants to look at questions such as, 'How do I feel about where I live?', 'How do I feel about who I am and my relationship with myself?' In *Encounters* projects we tend to try to work with a range of different dimensions. There's myself, there's my friends, my family, there's the community and environment, there's my ancestors and there's the wider web of life.

So when we shift to thinking about the future we invite people to share their vision for a future through those different dimensions. It starts to be a situation where they could have a conversation with someone about their vision of their future for themselves, with regards to their friends, their family, or their community. So we work quite personally, but then support the possibility of starting to create dialogues with people from those different dimensions. So if we're all looking at what might be our future vision for our community or for a place or for the environment, there are different layers of ways of thinking about that future. It's about starting from the personal connection.

I'm wary of going straight to the future with a group of people in a community without having any personal connection, where people can look each other in the eye and see that they're co-creating this future together. So we are interesting in exploring how you can take the past and the present with you, where the present is you and me in this moment, in order to be able to go into the future. So each person is responsible.

**MB:** Yes, the future can seem quite abstract a lot of the time, so it seems you're trying to shift it away from being abstract and making it much more real and embedded and grounded.

**RBT:** Grounded yeah. And embedded in relationship, I think that's what we need to do. We need to embed the future in relationship. As a culture I think we're really used to thinking that we can plan something for the future and someone else will do it for us. That was a lot of what was happening when I was working on neighbourhood plans in the beginning of 2000. There was that real sense of well we can make this substantial ten year plan and communities can be involved in planning and then we hand it over to service providers, to experts, to neighbourhood development workers to implement it for them. Now in 2014 it is totally the reverse and now everything is about how services can streamline down due to current cuts and hand over everything to communities to run, whether they have the capacity or not. And so I don't feel wary of the future, but I just think that again, it's about this process. It's fantastic to vision, but then actually we then immediately need to ask what steps we can take, what steps am I going to take, what steps do I take with my friends and family, what steps do I take with the community, so that it's real.

**MB:** Back-casting<sup>3</sup> is a bit like that I suppose. In that case the future isn't something that is just automatically going to happen. Instead it has to be something that unfolds from the process going on now. Like when you look at a clock, you can go to 12 o'clock and you can just jump forward to 4 o'clock and you don't have to think about all the things that happen between 12 and 4. It seems like in your work you're trying to produce a much more material sense of a time that has to unfold from the possibilities or relationships available now?

**RBT:** I think that it's the relationships maybe more than the possibilities, because I do think it's important to create the kind of relational space that makes it possible to imagine. What I feel is essential in looking at the future is to explore how we can imagine from a sense of relationship so our hearts are open, so we're connected. And how do we imagine, realising that in the future, like in the past, there's going to be a myriad of experiences? So the approaches we've developed in *Encounters* prepare people for the journey of imagination, rather than just chucking them into a room and asking them what they want.

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<sup>3</sup> Unlike forecasting, which tries to predict the future by extrapolating from the present, back-casting starts from a desired future and works backwards, determining what steps would be needed to get from here to there. It has been taken up widely in the Transition Towns movement.



When I'm looking at the future I would never simply ask people what they want, because I think then you can only answer from your own experience. You're not stepping into another more liminal space from which to imagine something. You know, I think I said to you before that when I was working on a housing estate in Huddersfield, planners went in and said to a kid on this housing estate where there was nothing, absolutely no playground, nothing, they said to the kid, "So what kind

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of playground do you want?" And they were talking about spending vast amounts of money on developing a playground, and the kid said, "I'd just like one swing." That was

the kid's reality. So to simply ask 'what do you want' is only going to draw on the experience of the kid in that moment, rather than exploring the future in another sense. So we actually try to not ask about the future directly, but instead work by being more oblique, by being more experiential, by having a game with that kid, by understanding, for example, 'Ah okay, this is the rhythm and the way this child wants to play'. So when you look at the future I would say that you need to focus on both imagination of possibilities and relationships.

## *The feeling of time*

**MB:** Thanks, that's really, really interesting. I want to move on to another way of thinking about time, and that's to focus in on the personal, experiential feeling of time. From this perspective time isn't something that flows smoothly and continuously, but always has an emotional quality to it, where different moments will feel differently, for example, relaxing or exciting, blank or full. I was wondering whether in your work you've tried to produce different experiences of time in this sense. Particularly I'm interested in whether you think some kinds of time feel more connected, or allow connections better than other forms of time. Does that come up, and if it does would you deliberately try to use that?

**RBT:** Well I suppose what comes to mind straight away is the kind of work that performance does. Throughout history, performance has always been a process that creates a holding structure to allow a community or a group of people to come together and step into another realm of time. Within this structure you know that something is going to happen, let's call it a ritual, a ceremony, that's where the performance happens. And in that time of the performance it's possible to create a sense of timelessness and it's possible to be transported. So a performance can create a holding frame in which it's possible to really play around with time. Yet at the same time a performance itself is ephemeral and transitory.

So in my work over the last 20 years, I've used performance as a method to mark a moment in time where it's possible to be in *communitas* with other people. These moments can be a transcendent kind of time, one that is really connected and creates a sense of witnessing and receiving. So I think I definitely try to deliberately work with performance methods to create that kind of time. We don't often have those sorts of times outside of church perhaps. So that's one clear way that I use time in the kinds of ways you were talking about, because I think there's a real power in people witnessing each other.

Another example, is in all the *Encounters Shop* projects we've done. Here we use multiple structures of time. We're open from nine to five and since we're usually on the High Street, people are often feeling the pressure to be here, there and everywhere. But within this we invite people to reflect on time. So unlike a traditional shop we set ours up so that it's a place in which it's possible for people to reflect on themselves and on their lives. We show that there's a place to do that, which naturally invites a kind of slowing down, a sense of 'oh I'm breathing, I'm stopping.' In the first ten minutes or so that they are in the shop people can sink quite deeply into a moment of reflection, or feel a moment of joy because they are connecting with somebody. So I suppose that actually in a lot of my work I do quite deliberately play around with creating a kind of 'body time' or 'breath time,' as opposed to going along with clock time. As an artist it's possible for us to not be dominated by clock time but to create our own structures and ways of being in the moment that allow difference.

And then, just briefly, in *A Little Patch of Ground* again we are quite deliberately shifting people's senses of time. In that project we're growing food, we're eating together, we're reflecting together, we're performing together, and I really noticed that all of those activities in themselves have a whole mixture of being quite high, quite energised, quite relaxed, of being outside, and sometimes some of the participants have talked about feeling rushed or that there's so much to do. So there's an intensity of that which has been challenging, because we've only got three hours in our sessions.

So sometimes I get caught, as a facilitator, between wanting to cover quite a lot of material and being pulled sometimes by the participant's natural time, which maybe is a need to go much slower than I as a facilitator have set for that session. And so I often find that edge between my own ambition and an awareness that sometimes a group wants to come and chat for three hours. Is that okay when it's a project that's funded, that has a particular intention and when there's other things like the vegetables that need to be sorted out and working out what we're going to eat? So those three hours can be a microcosm of life

that can be quite a challenge. Sometimes I would wonder whether I was imposing my time because I'm the facilitator. You know, do I just completely back off and go with their time, with the time of the group?

**MB:** Yeah, that's really fascinating, because we've talked before about the *Encounters Shop* projects, how I had noticed that there were comments from quite a few people realising that they've lost track of time and going, "Oh whoops, I have to go to a meeting." They'd get caught up in it and want to spend more time there, you know, and because they're all excited they'd say, "Oh I'll come back and volunteer every day," and then they look at their diaries and realise "Oh no I don't actually have time." But they just get all swept up and they'd lose track of other things. But so did you find that in the *Patch* project that's not the same?

**RBT:** No, because in a way people have already cleared their diaries and they know they're going to commit to coming three hours every week. What was really interesting was the contrast between the city and the rural, because we twinned these projects. So there was a rural one here in Devon and then there was one

in the East End of London, and it was really, really noticeable that the rural group were there much more often. They came every week. You know, there was much less to drag them away than

*THROUGHOUT HISTORY, PERFORMANCE HAS ALWAYS BEEN A PROCESS THAT CREATES A HOLDING STRUCTURE TO ALLOW A COMMUNITY OR A GROUP OF PEOPLE TO COME TOGETHER AND STEP INTO ANOTHER REALM OF TIME.*

in the city group. And in the city group they talked about how there was a much more transitory feel to where they lived. There was also a huge cultural diversity in the London group, so I think there were also different attitudes to regularity or coming every week. So there were often quite a lot of things that came up at the last moment. And it felt like the city group were just on a much faster pace and that it was harder for them to really say they were going to attend, since the project was over quite a long period time.

It was interesting that for both groups the project ran for five or six months, every week for three hours, which was quite a big commitment, and in the London group I definitely had the feeling that a natural timeframe would've been a bit shorter. So it was interesting that the city energy was kind of pulling them in other directions all the time and it was harder just to say, "I'm going to give this three hours per week."

**MB:** So in some of my other work I've been interested in the varieties of ways people are using time to address social inequalities. This suggests that part of what's involved in challenging homophobia, racism, sexism etc., is transforming how we experience and think about time. So there are two aspects to this I guess in relation to our discussions today. There's the idea of challenging and transforming time in your work and your projects, but then there is also the way organisations or people doing this kind of work are maybe changing time in their own lives. I was wondering if you think in your projects you're trying to share that attempt to do time differently more widely?

**RBT:** I think that in the projects it's like that. There's a very definite intention around taking time into our own hands let's say, and saying, "We can use this time and things can happen," particularly in the *Encounters Shops*, we talked about that, and then in the *Patch of Ground* projects and in other projects.

I think that personally I sometimes have a totally unrealistic sense of what's possible to do in a certain time. Sometimes there's a real mismatch between what I can actually do in eight hours and what I imagine I can do in eight hours. And I'm really, really aware of that. So I suppose that's an ongoing challenge. And as an organisation I can often see all the things that we could be doing or partnerships that could be being developed, or projects or funding that we could put in for, or opportunities to develop. And I'm still working out how to deal with it. Is it more realistic to say, "Well we're just going to concentrate on more of a micro sense of time," or will we try to do many things on many levels, dealing with lots of different stakeholders and partners and potentially getting overwhelmed with that. So, you know, I find that on a personal and organisational level it is still something that I find really challenging.

From an *Encounters* point of view what we have been doing for the last year, which has been really good, is as a group of associates we've been quite disciplined about taking time every quarter just to have a really spacious day together to reflect and to play in a studio space. And I would say that those days have absolutely sustained us, since usually there are about ten of us caught up in emails and working together and doing everything else. So really fundamentally because the retreats are relationship-building they allow us to go to a deeper level, they are a place to relax and let go. It's important to be prepared to take the risk of having that as a priority, to actually take two hours out to have a walk or to make time for each other.

There's more and more research that shows that wellbeing, which is really what we're talking about, requires you to create breaks in time, because we are

so dominated by this sort of multiple rush and it's exhausting. So I try and always walk the walk in terms of

*IT'S IMPORTANT TO BE PREPARED TO TAKE THE RISK OF HAVING [TIME FOR REFLECTION] AS A PRIORITY, TO ACTUALLY TAKE TWO HOURS OUT TO HAVE A WALK OR TO MAKE TIME FOR EACH OTHER.*

some of the principles that we're trying to bring into our work. For example, we used permaculture principles quite a lot in *A Patch of Ground* and as part of our team reflections we were also trying to use those principles

as well, looking at how we might have conserved energy, or reused and recycled. So we're really trying to look at modelling different ways of working in our current and future projects and linking them with how we want to be in the world. It feels as if that's essential for us all to be doing that really, but we're still against a system that isn't really allowing for that.

### *The time of success & failure*

**MB:** Thanks. So there was one final question that I was also really interested in, which partly links up with the time of the project that you were just talking about, and that's ideas of success and failure and the way time gets brought in as part of evaluating a project.

In talking about evaluation, people have mentioned the difficulty of shifting from very complex community environments to methods of evaluation where proofs of success can be quite static, or quantitative. Then there are also Western understandings of progress, which are often quite linear, and assume that things should always be getting better and better. So there's interest in how to allow room for accepting failure and learning from it, without sweeping it aside so you can continue to tell a story of linear progress. So I don't know if any of those issues resonate with you in the context of your work?

**RBT:** Yes. One of the joys of being an artist is that built into it is an iterative process of learning from the things that don't work, as much as those that do work. We're often piloting something new because that's part of the nature of the work. Creatively there's a lot of imagining, and responding and designing, and coming up with projects or processes that have elements of risk attached to them because they haven't been done before. So one of the values of arts practitioners or arts practice within this whole realm of community work is taking a risk, learning from failure, changing and adapting to what's emerging. So it feels as if that more flexible approach to success and failure is built in to the creative process.

Sometimes it amazes me when I'm engaging with other agencies and that approach is not built in. I tend

to see things as circles rather than lines, you know. And so yes we evaluate projects, but I'm much more interested in the qualitative aspects of people's journey throughout the project, rather than progress. I like to think of it as "What's my journey, what journey have I travelled?" Sometimes the most challenging things for somebody in a project, or even for us designing it, are the biggest teachers. These kinds of situations can actually be an amazingly rich learning ground.

**MB:** Have you ever felt pressured to respond to funders or to other organisations in the project sooner than you'd like to? Say they want interim results or they want end results, and so you've perhaps felt that pressure of having to justify what you've done too soon?

**RBT:** When I was doing work that was really explicitly creative consultation with Local Authorities then yes. We tend to do two types of projects. Apart from being called in as consultants to work with others on their projects, we also do self-initiated projects where we apply for the funding and so can determine for ourselves how and what we're going to evaluate. We see these projects as a rich experience in themselves, depending on the people who are involved.

I've started to deliberately move myself away from the kinds of projects that require hard outcomes, where people are standing over you demanding the results because they need to write a policy paper for example. It's not that I wouldn't do those projects, and I have in the past. I suppose I feel more that in the terms of doing an arts project there are outcomes that are looked for, but they can be around wellbeing, around self-valuing. There is more support for quite personal outcomes, rather than a focus on producing blanket transformations in a community. I'm quite sceptical about the ability to produce those kinds of blanket outcomes; it can be quite meaningless to say you can achieve them.

So I have felt pressured and I know that there's part of me that's fascinated by the journeys people travel and that's where I would put my focus in a project. It's really, really hard to say, "At the end of this project this community is now more cohesive," you know. I could say, "This person feels more confident to speak to somebody from a different culture, or this person feels that they've changed their attitudes about where they live," you know, those things interest me. But I'm a bit more sceptical about drawing grander conclusions than that really.

**MB:** Ok, well thank you so much for a fascinating discussion.

**RBT:** Thank you.

# Temporal Belongings

The Temporal Belongings research network supports the development of a more coordinated understanding of the interconnections between time and community. We provide opportunities to share research and practical experience and to develop new collaborations. We also produce resources that will support the development of this research area. To find out more about our activities go to: [www.temporalbelongings.org](http://www.temporalbelongings.org)



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